

Operation Airborne Dragon, Northern Iraq

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BAYONET 6, this is Dragon 6. I can be rolling to Irbil in 4 hours with tanks and Bradleys. Over.” Lieutenant Colonel Ken Riddle, Commander, 1st Battalion, 63d Armor and Task Force (TF) 1-63 initiated this radio transmission from the Bashur Airfield in northern Iraq to his newly assigned parent unit, the 173d Airborne Regiment on 7 April 2003. The communication marked the beginning of the first expeditionary insertion of a U.S. armored force into combat by air.

Task Force 1-63’s lead elements: an M1A1 tank, an M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle, an M113 armored personnel carrier, mortars, and a battalion command post (CP) equipped with satellite communications arrived at Bashur Airfield to support the opening of the northern front in Iraq. With them came scouts, military police (MPs), and a combat service support platoon.

Task Force 1-63’s armor systems were nearly impervious to Iraqi weapons systems. Therefore, it was no surprise that shortly after TF 1-63’s arrival in the Iraqi Theater of operations, enemy divisions in northern Iraq began to disintegrate. Much of the Iraqi military capitulated in the north by 10 April 2003. Following the Iraqi regime’s rapid collapse, TF 1-63 and the remainder of the 173d Airborne Regiment were attached to the 4th Infantry Division (ID) and rapidly transitioned to stability operations near Kirkuk.

This historic, successful airborne insertion is a tribute to the soldiers of TF 1-63 and to U.S. Army Europe’s (USAREUR’s) ability to rapidly organize, deploy, and sustain this force. USAREUR’s strategic forward positioning in Germany was an essential factor in furthering this achievement.

Anticipatory planning and preparation and a forward-based and trained IRTF force located in the mature European theater were the keys to success. [Accomplishing] this operation from an immature theater or from a base in the continental U.S. is unlikely. Doing so would have involved dedicating an inordinate amount of strategic lift and attendant support assets for an indefinite period.

The Airborne Insertion

Task Force 1-63’s successful expeditionary mission began in early September 2002, when USAREUR ordered the 1st ID’s 3d Brigade to provide forces to serve as the NATO-led Kosovo Forces’ Multinational Brigade (East) during rotation 4B. As the brigade prepared to participate in the Kosovo 4B rotation, 1st Battalion, 63d Armor, nicknamed the “Dragon Battalion,” one of 3d Brigade’s organic battalions, remained in Europe to assume the brigade’s rear detachment mission.

In late September 2002, it became clear that Operation Iraqi Freedom was a near certainty, and the 1st Armored Division (AD), the European central region immediate ready task force’s (IRTF’s) designated unit at that time, was assigned to participate in the Iraqi operation. Therefore, the Army ordered TF 1-63 to backfill the 1st AD in the IRTF mission beginning in January 2003. In November and December 2002, TF 1-63 conducted rigorous training to validate its readiness to assume the mission and equipment stocks from the 1st AD.

CENTCOM knew that opening a northern front in Iraq would hasten the Iraqi regime's rapid collapse, protect critical Iraqi oil fields, and protect the Kurdish population from atrocities. [However], because the government of Turkey denied coalition forces permission to move by ground through their country, a credible force could not move by ground into northern Iraq.

Even with TF 1-63's aggressive training plan, the odds seemed to be strongly against TF 1-63's employment anywhere, let alone in Iraq. With its IRTF train-up complete in late January 2003, TF 1-63 shifted its focus to helping the 1st AD rapidly qualify

its M1A1 tank and Bradley crews before they deployed to Iraq. In March 2003, TF 1-63 was completely engaged in training a sister division for combat; then the situation began to change.

Opening the Northern Front

U.S. Army Central Command (CENTCOM) knew that opening a northern front in Iraq would hasten the Iraqi regime's rapid collapse, protect critical Iraqi oil fields, and protect the Kurdish population from atrocities. CENTCOM examined its options. The conventional wisdom was that the enemy's divisions would not capitulate until a credible threat presented itself on a second front in the north. However, the coalition force land component commander (CFLCC) had a problem. Because the government of Turkey denied coalition forces permission to move by ground through their country, a

Operation Airborne Dragon—Time Lines

04 MAR 03 — Turkish parliament fails to achieve a majority vote for allowing U.S. ground forces to transit through Turkey into northern Iraq.

04 MAR 03 — A conference to finalize the force structure and the 173d Airborne Regiment's employment is scheduled in Qatar. The employment concept includes two airborne battalions and the immediate ready task force (IRTF) (-) heavy ready company (HRC), medium ready company (MRC), tactical command and control (C2) force enhancement module (FEM), and the combat service support (CSS) FEM conducting a combination airborne and air-land operation in northern Iraq. The apportioned air sorties to support this operation limit the size of the force considered feasible for initial employment.

11 MAR 03 — Employment is likely as a result of the recent conference in Qatar and the lack of a favorable decision in Turkey. The coalition force land component commander (CFLCC) has submitted a request for forces (including the forces identified in this contingency plan [CONPLAN]) to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and expects approval of the request within 72 hours.

17 MAR 03 — Deployment Order (DEPORD) 195, including all the forces listed in the task organization, is currently with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) for approval; an order is expected within the next 24 to 48 hours that will place these

forces at their respective air port of embarkation (APOE) not later than (NLT) 24 MAR 03.

21 MAR 03 — Turkey authorizes overflight of its airspace, but denies the U.S. the use of ground lines of communication through Turkey to open the northern front in Iraq.

28 MAR 03 — The offense into Iraq from the south by CFLCC forces slows down. Iraqi 10th and 11th Divisions did not capitulate as had been predicted.

06 APR 03 — The JCS approve European Command (EUCOM) DEPORD 195, including all forces listed in the task organization, for deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although the exact date for deployment is not set, the estimated arrival date (EAD) for task force (TF) 1-63 is currently 21 April, and the latest arrival date (LAD) is 27 April. These dates were verified with the combined forces special operations component commander's (CFSOCC's) planners as of 61200Z APR 03. The provisional headquarters (HQs) 201/FSB [forward support battalion] (-) has already deployed to northern Iraq and has been detached to the 173d Airborne Regiment. The remainder of this unit will deploy with TF 1-63 from Ramstein Air Base.

7 APR 03 — Lead elements of TF 1-63 land at the Bashur Airfield in Northern Iraq.

10 APR 03 — Much of the Iraqi force capitulates in northern Iraq.

credible force could not move by ground into northern Iraq.

Airborne units solved part of this problem. The 173d Airborne Regiment, part of the European Command's (EUCOM's) Strategic Ready Force, could deploy within 96 hours and was ready to support CENTCOM operations. Employing the 173d Airborne Regiment allowed the combatant CENTCOM to open the northern front. While this solved the problem of entry into the northern theater, it did not sufficiently address the Iraqi armored threat in the north.

Traditionally, the United States has inserted armored forces into a theater by sea or on the ground. With Turkey unavailable, the only other ground entrance to Iraq was through Kuwait, which the 3d ID was still working to open. Another alternative was to attempt to insert an armored force by air. This unique force would need to be tailored with the necessary combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS) elements. CENTCOM looked to EUCOM, the supporting command.

Within EUCOM, USAREUR's forward-based troops provided a ready-made solution. In particular, the IRTF consisted of a heavy tank team and an M113 mechanized infantry team with engineers, scouts, MP, command and control, and CSS assets, ready to deploy with 96 hours notice. The task force was well suited to conduct an expeditionary insertion to support the 173d Airborne Regiment's parachute infantry forces.

In early March, USAREUR and the 1st ID issued a detailed warning order to TF 1-63 with the concept of the operation during early contingency planning. The concept of the operation read: "The focus of this order is to address a contingency to accomplish the purpose of the CFLCC CENTCOM mission to provide a credible force in northern Iraq. To that end, a force capable of providing an offensive mounted tactical assault capability is necessary. In this branch plan, 1 ID (M) [mechanized], provides the IRTF (-) to augment the ground combat power of the 173d Airborne Regiment (-). The IRTF [1-63] will be detached to 173d Airborne Regiment/CFSOCC [combined forces special operations component commander] in Central Region upon alert and deploys from the DPC [deployment processing center, located at Rhine Ordnance Barracks, Germany] under the control of the 173d Airborne Regiment. In addition, a Forward Support Battalion (FSB) [the 201st FSB (-)] will be attached to 173d Airborne Regiment/CFSOCC in Central Region upon alert, and deploy with the 173d Airborne Regiment from Aviano, Italy."¹

Concurrent with planning at all levels of command, TF 1-63 prepared for alert and employment under

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the following orders: "1 ID (M) MISSION. On order, 1 ID (M) prepares, assists in planning for the employment of, and deploys TF 1-63 and 201 FSB (-) in support of CENTCOM land operations in northern Iraq to support operation plan (OPLAN) 1003V.

"1 ID (M) Commander's Intent. I intend to support the CFSOCC and CENTCOM purpose to

IRTF Final Task Organization

TF 1-63 (IRTF)(-) (Attached to 173d Airborne Regiment on deployment)

B/2-2 IN (-) MRC

1/B/2-2 IN (M113)

3/B/2-2 IN (M113)

TM C/1-63 AR (-) HRC

2/B/2-2 IN (M2)

3/C/1-63 AR (M1)

HHC/1-63 AR (-)

TACTICAL C2 FEM

²SCT/1-63 AR (SCT FEM)

²3/554 MP CO (-) (MP FEM)

³MTR/ 1-63 AR (DEPOD 195 one section each as part of HRC and MRC)

CSS FEM (Maintenance & Support Slice) (-) (DS)

¹Provisional BN/201 FSB (-) (Attached to 173d Airborne Regiment on deployment)

¹DET/HHC/201 FSB

CSS FEM (Maintenance & Support Slice) (-) (DS to TF 1-63 AR)

⁴FSC/173 ABN BDE (DS to 173d Airborne Brigade)

⁴MMT/200 MMC

1. Authority to deploy these forces is under combat service support (CSS) force enhancement module (FEM) in Deployment Order (DEPOD) 195.

2. Authority to deploy is part of command and control (C2) FEM on DEPOD 195 (BPT [be prepared to] DEPLOY).

3. One section each is part of heavy ready company (HRC) and medium ready company (MRC) for DEPOD 195.

4. Organic or assigned to the 173d Airborne Regiment, not part of 1st ID.

provide a credible ground combat threat in northern Iraq. Unified command and control of the deploying forces in the Central Region is decisive to the success of this operation. The following conditions must be met to accomplish this operation: safe deployment, flawless air-load planning, link-up of equipment and personnel at the DPC and with the 173d Airborne Regiment, integration of the provisional 201 FSB (-) into the 173d Airborne Regiment deployment and sustainment plan, and the detachment of a combat ready IRTF (-) and Provisional 201 FSB (-). End state for this operation is the successful integration of the IRTF (-) forces and Provisional 201 FSB (-) under 173d Airborne Regiment command and control.”²

Although the situation changed and evolved over a 30-day period, the original mission and intent remained consistent; it was exactly what USA-REUR had envisioned and resourced the IRTF to accomplish.

Expeditionary Logistics

The U.S. Army is experienced with resupplying a light force by air, but EUCOM and CENTCOM planners had two limitations to overcome before Operation Airborne Dragon could commence: How could they sustain an armored force that would require up to 10,000 gallons of fuel per day? And, how could they provide resupply of bulky repair parts that are difficult to transport into a theater where there is austere logistical support?

USAREUR helped EUCOM and CENTCOM planners overcome these two logistical challenges. The contracted use of commercial carriers from across Europe—and from Turkey in particular—solved the problem of fueling the force. USAREUR and the U.S. Air Force in Europe (USAFE), both familiar with the region, negotiated line-hauled fuel from Turkish companies into northern Iraq. Special Operations Command coordinated for Kurdish factions inside Iraq to secure the commercial fuel movements into northern Iraq.

The solution for providing repair parts was ingeniously simple. EUCOM and CENTCOM planners took advantage of USAREUR combat divisions’ being based near the Ramstein Air Base aerial port of embarkation (APOE), only 8 hours flying time away from northern Iraq. Therefore, a plan fell into place that called for USAFE to routinely fly TF 1-63’s sustainment stocks, located in their German-based motor pool, into northern Iraq using theater air assets. This lessened dependence on the use of strategic air frames.

Expeditionary Movement

As deployment began, USAFE transported the task force into the area of operations in 30 C-17 sorties. The initial 23 sorties brought in the main combat forces led by the heavier combat vehicles. The final seven brought in CS assets and supplies. Thereafter, daily sustainment sorties arrived from Ramstein.

This operation demonstrated exceptional flexibility in support planning and execution within the divisional structure. To ensure the task force’s timely resupply, the 1st ID established direct links via telephonic and secure and nonsecure Internet protocol routing communications between the 201 FSB (-) forward in Iraq and the 1st ID’s materiel management center (MMC) in Germany.

The MMC, which also had communications links to all of the division’s warehouses, processed supply requests, transported the supplies, palletized materiel for shipment, and handed the pallets over to the 21st Theater Support Command at the Ramstein APOE for air movement to Iraq on tactical sustainment flights. Personnel manned cells at the MMC and the warehouses 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. Through May 2003, approximately 150 C-17 sorties and 30 C-130 sorties flew into the Iraqi theater of operations from Germany to keep TF 1-63 fit to fight.

The process for supplying nonmission-capable parts also illustrates the system’s responsiveness. After receiving a nonmission-capable parts request, the MMC usually had the required parts at the Ramstein APOE within 2 hours—ready for shipment on the next flight. Adding the 201 FSB (-) was important. The FSB solved the complex logistics issues attendant to not having ground lines of communication to resupply heavy forces. The FSB kept the 173d Airborne Regiment and TF 1-63 well supplied and maintained, routinely maintaining a 90 percent operational ready rate.

Anticipatory planning and preparation and a forward-based and trained IRTF force located in the mature European theater were the keys to success during this operation. That the United States could have accomplished this operation from an immature theater or from a base in the continental U.S. is unlikely. Doing so would have involved dedicating an inordinate amount of strategic lift and attendant support assets for an indefinite period, which might have adversely affected the air campaign and the ground scheme of maneuver in Iraq significantly. USAREUR’s rapidly deployable armored forces shortened Operation Iraqi Freedom and saved lives. **MR**

NOTES

1. USAREUR and 1st Infantry Division Warning Order (Airborne Dragon), Concept of Operation.
2. *Ibid.*